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SUBJECT: PRM VISIT TO PAKISTAN: JULY 14-24

REF: PESHAWAR 428

¶1. (SBU) Summary: This is a report from PRM/ECA Deputy Director Nancy Iris and Program Officer Amy Wendt's visit to Pakistan July 14-24. The GOP is looking to the international community for a renewed commitment to assist with the impact Afghan refugees have had on Pakistan's environment, infrastructure, economy, and security. GOP officials with direct responsibility for refugee programs remain surprisingly pragmatic given the numbers involved (over 2 million Afghan refugees remain in Pakistan), a worsening security situation, and chaotic internal politics. This is a critical period for refugee policy as a new strategy for the management of Afghans in Pakistan is needed to replace a previous three-year plan which ends in 2009. The Refugee Affected Hosting Areas (RAHA) initiative, first announced in Brussels in 2005, has yet to be implemented, but is much needed. Internationally-funded international organization (IO) and non-governmental organization (NGO) services are often the only ones available to reach the refugee population; this situation is unsustainable and more capacity building for the GOP to enable it to provide health and education services to its own populations as well as to Afghans within its borders is critical. End summary.

GOP Meetings

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¶2. (SBU) Iris and Wendt met with Mr. Rauf Abdur Khan, Chief Commissioner, Commissionate for Afghan Refugees (CAR) and Dr. Imran Zeb Khan, Commissioner, in what turned out to be the Chief Commissioner's last day in his position. Kahn was reassuringly forward-looking in his rhetoric concerning the current but outdated official three-year strategy that the GOP has in place for managing Afghan refugees. His view is that a revised strategy is obviously necessary and should be one that looks at the medium term of four to five years.

(Comment: There seems to be an acknowledgment by GOP officials working with refugees that a horizon tied to the five-year Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) would be more pragmatic. Khan has come a long way in his thinking during his 15 months in office, starting as rigidly anti-Afghan and ending with a much more realistic and sympathetic outlook.)

¶3. (SBU) Khan commented he did not mind if not all the refugees returned to Afghanistan, but reiterated the vast majority of them should go back some day. He is willing to see several hundred thousand widows and vulnerable Afghans stay, but he wants the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to set up some arrangement with target numbers, a schedule, and a framework for repatriations over the coming years. He

noted that if this is not possible, then it might ultimately come to a unilateral decision one day when the GOP would insist that the Afghans simply go home.

¶ 14. (SBU) Chief Commissioner Kahn pointed out that the GOP bears a lot of hidden costs for Afghans. This sentiment was reiterated in a meeting with Mr. Waqar Ayub, Provincial Commissioner for Afghan Refugees (NWFP). He is a member of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) provincial civil administration and is responsible for the implementation of federal policy at the provincial level. He came to office on March 1 (the day the repatriation season opened), and his first and immediate task was to close the Jalozi camp. He also acknowledged the current plan for all Afghan refugees to return home by 2009 is flawed and unrealistic. He thinks the GOP should look at allowing more time for repatriations and must fine tune its policy. The repercussions of refoulement would be the loss of goodwill with the international community and with UNHCR upon whom it depends for humanitarian assistance for refugees.

¶ 15. (U) The Provincial Commissioner spoke knowledgeably, at some length, about definitions of a refugee and refugee law and practice as well as the serious impact the Afghan refugees had had on Pakistan's social services, environment, food costs, and infrastructure. An example of environmental degradation in Balochistan due to the refugee influx was also described in detail by a PRM NGO partner during the trip. Ayub opined that Pakistan itself was the biggest donor of refugee assistance in the region, with little recognition of its role from the international community; it had generously

ISLAMABAD 00003027 002 OF 004

provided refuge to its brothers for almost 30 years dating back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

¶ 16. (SBU) Ambassador Rustam Shah, former Chief Commissioner for Afghan Refugees and former Pakistani Ambassador to Afghanistan, has recently been hired by UNHCR to consult on Afghan refugee issues. He sees himself as an ambassador to Pakistan in Afghanistan and as an ambassador to Afghanistan in Pakistan. While he acknowledged some adverse affects Afghans have had on the environment and infrastructure, he believes that this is balanced by significant positive contributions as Afghans dominate the construction and labor industries, constitute a high number of agricultural workers and carpet weavers, run restaurants and other businesses, and account for significant remittances coming into the country. Looking ahead, Shah stressed the need for creating conducive conditions in Afghanistan as a pull factor for sustainable returns. He believes the international community's willingness to support the Refugee Affected Hosting Areas (RAHA) initiative is vital. The Pakistani beneficiary host communities need to know the RAHA projects are a thank you to them for hosting the refugees and there should be ample publicity to include local authorities.

Refugee Affected Hosting Areas (RAHAs)

¶ 17. (U) The RAHA initiative aims to promote peaceful co-existence by rehabilitating refugees-hosting areas and upgrading facilities to benefit both the Afghan and Pakistani communities. It is a joint project of the GOP (SAFRON/CCAR) and UNDP/UNHCR supported by the UN country team. UNHCR conducted a first phase needs assessment in 2007 and UNDP published the findings of a second phase needs assessment in April 2008. At the time of the PRM trip, a UN country team, under the UN's Delivering As One initiative was in the field developing an implementation plan for RAHA. The PRM team met separately with recently arrived UNDP Resident Coordinator of One UN, Fikret Akcura; and Guenet Guebre-Christos, UNHCR Representative, Guenet Guebre-Christos, who has been in Pakistan four years. (Comment: The RAHA is an important experimental model to support and watch. Three million Afghans comprise what is known as the largest protracted

refugee situation in the world. Some U.S. funding targets refugees; some targets host country nationals. A creative and flexible funding approach by the U.S. and other donors will be needed to combine support to meet the needs of all populations and to help RAHA succeed.)

¶8. (U) Until the RAHA initiative is fully tested and made operational, support for refugees will continue to be needed in the NWFP and Balochistan Provinces. In addition to the nationwide support conducted by UNHCR, a number of non-governmental organizations provide services to the long-standing refugee population in Pakistan. While some have already begun transitioning work on education and health services in NWFP to GOP entities, which should help fold into the overall RAHA strategy, others have only begun to plan for the transition. In particular, PRM NGO partners in Balochistan noted that very few refugees are returning to Afghanistan from camps and settlements in this province due to the continued insecurity in their areas of origin (e.g., Helmand and Kandahar provinces). As many of these refugees live in isolated areas far from local hosts, it is unlikely that they will be reached in the first waves of RAHA initiative projects, requiring continued direct support from UNHCR, NGOs, and the international community for the foreseeable future while UNHCR and the GOP discuss the longer-term protection strategy.

UNHCR

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¶9. (U) UNHCR has advocated successfully with the GOP for the protection of refugees, and the Ministry of SAFRON is preparing a new strategy for the management of Afghans in Pakistan to replace the previous three-year plan aiming at the repatriation of all remaining Afghans by the end of 2009. This previous plan has been recognized by stakeholders as unrealistic given the regional security situation and Afghanistan's lack of capacity to receive returning refugees and to provide a durable solution for them. However, UNHCR believes public and political opinion will turn against the

ISLAMABAD 00003027 003 OF 004

refugees if enhanced and visible support for the RAHA is not forthcoming. They would like to see the GOP announce the end of the current three-year plan and elaboration of the new strategy which will include RAHA and be keyed to a timeframe tied to the five-year Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS). One of UNHCR's key policy objectives is to secure an understanding that a comprehensive resolution of Afghan displacement is contingent on progress in the reconstruction and state-building process -- an improvement in the security situation and a conducive regional environment -- and that solutions for many registered Afghans will lie in Pakistan and Iran in the meantime.

¶10. (U) The PRM monitoring team visited a UNHCR Center in Peshawar where they saw the biometrics registration system UNHCR has implemented for Afghan refugees. UNHCR argues that registered Afghans are of great importance to regional stability and security. They do not believe security concerns can be addressed through unplanned camp closures which disperses previously stable populations. They would like to see the international community give more credit and support to the GOP for its support to refugees. UNHCR is taking a comprehensive look at all refugees remaining in Pakistan. They believe all three durable solutions -- return/reintegration, local integration, and resettlement -- are needed. Meanwhile, the refugees need predictability of stay.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

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¶11. (U) Pakistan is seeing more of its own citizens become displaced by violence. The movement of these nationals to urban areas and subsequent demand driven rent increases

combined with rising food prices everywhere and a poor economy is forcing out long-term refugees. The GOP only very recently has asked the international community through UNHCR, ICRC and UNDP for assistance; previously they had been reluctant to accept such help.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

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¶12. (SBU) ICRC has expressed concern that it is still limited in its ability to travel to the most conflict-affected parts of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) to provide support to those internally displaced by violence. ICRC does help some weapon-wounded victims who are able to reach more accessible areas, such as Peshawar. ICRC works through private physicians and pays for medical care costs when these cases present themselves and also provides support to the Pakistan Red Crescent Society. ICRC Head of Delegation Pascal Cuttat said the GOP understands ICRC's role on these types of cases, does not impede their operations, and has signaled that ICRC would be authorized to provide additional humanitarian assistance if insecurity were to worsen. Like many of those trying to respond, however, ICRC still lacks enough information to quantify the number of IDPs and appropriate level of response needed by humanitarian actors. Of most concern to ICRC was the further breakdown of law and order in FATA and NWFP. Cuttat commented that criminal gangs were taking advantage of the growing insecurity in these areas and creating the greatest impediment to humanitarian actors meeting the needs of the presumed IDP population. In addition to further support in FATA and NWFP, ICRC hopes to expand its programs to Balochistan to support rural pastoralist communities also affected by conflict not necessarily related to that in FATA and NWFP.

NGO Partners

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¶13. (SBU) Interaction with NGO partners at program sites and at various meetings in Islamabad confirmed the impact a worsening security situation is having on humanitarian space.

The PRM monitoring team emphasized the need for capacity building with the GOP and long-range planning for the eventual elimination of parallel systems, particularly in the health and education sectors. Highlights of the trip included site-visits in Peshawar to an Afghan community school being assisted by the International Rescue Committee and a birthing center where several mothers, both Afghan and

ISLAMABAD 00003027 004 OF 004

Pakistani, had just given birth.

¶14. (SBU) Comment: The next few months are a critical time for the refugee program in Pakistan. A ministerial level meeting on returns and refugees in the region (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran) is scheduled for November 19 in Kabul. UNHCR is taking the lead. A finalization of Pakistan's revised Afghan refugee strategy would be a timely and important contribution to the November meeting. This would provide one element of the predictability of stay UNHCR is emphasizing in the region. The RAHA initiative potentially could be a model for refugee programs worldwide; early support by both the refugee and development fields will be important. More recently, UNHCR High Commissioner Antonio Guterres completed August 26-28 a three-day visit to Pakistan during which the GOP agreed to review its Afghan repatriation strategy beyond ¶2009. Both Guterres and the GOP reiterated their commitment to the voluntary and gradual spirit of repatriation. End comment.

PATTERSON